



*Employee Assistance Program (HSR-2)*

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## **Subject: Managing Stress**

Once again, our workforce is challenged to function effectively in the face of strong and seemingly unrelenting stress. All of us need to remember that self-care must coincide with, if not precede efforts to fix what is broken. If we do not take good care of ourselves, our ability to care for others and to address difficulties effectively will soon be compromised. We shared this message with you in early 2003 as we faced crisis and disruption then—we believe this message is as salient and essential now.

Here are some thoughts about managing stress:

“Managing stress” is often viewed as a trite piece of advice, full of good intention but lacking in substance or direction. For many of us, managing our stress is what we will do once the dust settles and we get our lives under control. In that approach lie the seeds for medical and psychological difficulties with long-term complications. Before we can “manage stress,” we have to be motivated to manage; that motivation can come from understanding the impact of chronic stress on our ability to function well. Once we know why we should “manage” stress, we have to be aware when we are stressed. With those two aspects in place, managing stress well becomes something we do for ourselves and those around us.

So, why do we need to manage our stress effectively? Our bodies are wonderfully equipped to respond automatically to anything that threatens our well-being. In the early response pattern, we don’t have to “think” in order to prepare for a threat. Once we label something as a threat, stress hormones are released throughout the body, and things happen automatically. That is a good thing. If, when encountering the saber-toothed tiger (read stress!!), my early ancestors would have needed to THINK: “OK, I need to start breathing quicker to get more oxygen in me so I can run. Let me get my heart rate up so the oxygen gets distributed more rapidly. Wait, let me get the blood out of my stomach and to my big muscles so I can move more quickly. Oh, and let me get the blood pressure up. OK, now I am ready!!”, then my ancestor would have been eaten and I would not be writing this piece. That entire body reaction to a stressful event happens automatically and very quickly. Once the stressful event has passed, our bodies are well equipped to reverse the events above, and we return to a more restful, healthy pattern of physiological maintenance.

Except when we don’t. And therein lies the problem for too many of us.

When stress is chronic, our bodies are vigilant and silently reacting to the threat with no time to recover. Tissues in our bodies are constantly bathed by stress hormones, like adrenaline, and that can become toxic for us. Heart and brain tissues can start to deteriorate. Blood pressure that went up to save us can stay up and kill us. Digestive problems can develop because blood flow to the stomach has been chronically restricted. But something more insidious happens under stress. Just as our bodies are hardwired to shut down our digestive system in order to meet a threat, so are our bodies hardwired to shut down the immune system until the crisis is past. So, chronic stress can be translated into chronic immune system dysregulation. We cannot recover from a health challenge as quickly, and we are much more vulnerable to every opportunistic infection that lurks in the environment.

So, now that you are highly motivated (I hope), what can we do about managing stress? We cannot take the stressful events out of our lives. Though we would like to have that control, there is no evidence that we will put that one off any time soon. The first step must be increasing our level of awareness regarding how stressed we are. Often under stress, we go on the automatic pilot. That is good in the short run, but often not in the long run. We can lose touch with our bodies—while we are losing our minds—and may not be aware that our physical and psychological health are being compromised. My advice is to assess how you are living now compared to an

earlier time, maybe before the Cerro Grande fire, maybe before the hard drive incident, maybe before the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack, maybe before our nation went to war, and before our workforce was challenged so publicly to effectively address our security and safety deficits. You get the overall picture, I am sure. And in the context of that systemic threat, each of us has had our own challenges to face. So ask yourselves these questions:

- Am I sleeping differently now?
- Am I eating differently now?
- Am I more irritable now (be honest here)?
- Am I less sociable now?
- Am I less productive at work?
- Am I enjoying life less now?
- Am I exercising less now?
- Am I smoking more now?
- Am I consuming more alcohol now?

After you ask and answer these questions, you might want to ask someone who knows you well to answer them for you. If these areas are changing, you might want to consider whether the automatic pilot needs to be turned off. Maybe it is time for better self-care strategies? So what does this mean?

Some changes are relatively simple. You might need to exercise more. Clearly, there are physical and psychological health benefits from regular, moderate exercise. You might need to address the sleep difficulties with help from a counselor or medical provider. You can begin to watch your diet, prompted by an increasing awareness that donuts are not a good long-term stress management strategy. You can schedule an activity that is enjoyable. For some, not putting the activity on the schedule means not engaging in the activity. The Wellness Center will be reopening to registered users on Monday, August 8; several self-care classes/sessions are being offered for all LANL workers—we encourage you to visit the Wellness Center homepage (<http://www.wellness.lanl.gov/>) for details.

Perhaps most importantly, you can talk to someone about the stress you are under. It might be a counselor, but it does not have to be. People who can talk about a stressful situation have fewer long-term complications than people who keep their stress to themselves. Research data are clear about that. So, find someone you trust and be open about what is happening to you. You may just need an attentive ear; you might also benefit from some advice or another point of view.

Remember, Employee Assistance Program counselors are available to each of you and can be reached at 667-7339. We can assist with stress management needs for any employee at LANL, not just UC employees. In just a few sessions, most people who use our biofeedback services report making rewarding strides in managing day-to-day stressors. Counselors can also offer you information about community resources should you prefer that option. Some are reluctant to ask for help because it might be seen as a sign of weakness. We are much more inclined to see it as a sign of good judgment. Concern for clearances often surfaces when people think about asking for help. I continue to believe, and the data support me, that clearances are very rarely jeopardized when employees seek professional help. Call us—anonously if you like—and we will discuss that, or any other issue, with you.

It is sometimes a challenge to develop good stress management skills when stress levels are high, but do not wait for a calm period to start to take care of yourselves. The wait may be too long, and the cost can be too high.